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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the difficulties faced by high schools in the United States. It outlines seven elements underlying the problems: mission confusion, the need for remediation, too large a scale, pupil motivation, obsolete notions of teaching and learning, the failure to stay abreast of issues confronting today's youth, and the proliferation of rival providers. The paper provides an overview of failed reforms, as measured by unacceptably low SAT averages and poor results in international test comparisons. It claims that high schools are a stepchild of federal policy, largely ignored because Washington focuses its attention on the early/middle grades and colleges. Although some worthy efforts for revitalizing schools are under way, such as Oregon's certificate of mastery program, the lack of a common theme hinders most initiatives. Stakeholders must ask what they want from secondary education. If it is agreed that education must impart skills and knowledge, equip students to take their places as citizens with knowledge of their government and history, then everyone must look to fill these goals. Rather than scaling back expectations, stakeholders should strengthen the high school's academic mission, give 12th-graders standardized tests that reflect knowledge attainment, make high school more engaging, leave no child behind, and promote school choice. (RJM)

What Ails U.S. High Schools?

How Should They Be Reformed?

Is There A Federal Role?

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What Ails Schools?
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Introduction

American high schools aren't working nearly well enough. They're producing weak academic results. Many are troubled institutions, confused about their missions. Only about three quarters of their entrants graduate "on schedule". In many communities, especially our big cities, they're often unruly places where little learning goes on.

To be sure, the United States also has some highly regarded secondary schools that do well by their (mostly) upper middle-class, college-bound students—the New Triers and Stuyvesants in the public sector, the Andovers and Sidwells in the private sector. There are less famous schools, too, often in small towns that perform reasonably well. But it's a mistake to be too dazzled by the bright stars. What they're most useful for is demonstrating what's possible in happy situations characterized by close convergence between a school's mission, clientele, community and resources.

The more typical U.S. high school is murky as to its raison d'etre, attended by a mix of young people with differing levels of preparation, aspiration and family support, and staffed by adults with variable skills and motivations. It's caught up in a whirl of education reforms and economic changes that don't mesh comfortably with its accustomed patterns and practices. Its graduates pose problems for colleges, private employers, even the military. Its dropouts pose problems for law enforcement, the welfare system and the civil society that they inhabit.

Today's Concerns

It's nothing new to remark upon the troubled performance and ill-focused mission of American high schools. We can trace such criticisms back to the mid-19th century and they've been frequent in the four decades since Harvard's James Bryant Conant almost single-handedly shaped the "comprehensive" U.S. high school, as we still know it.

The specific content of those critiques has varied with the enthusiasms and alarums of their times. In the 1960's and '70's, for example, we learned that high schools were repressive, authoritarian places that cramped the free spirits of their

students. Since 1983 and the report of the *National Commission on Excellence in Education*, the dominant critique has been their failure to impart enough academic skills and knowledge to their pupils. As the TIMSS report made vivid, when judged in international context on their math and science prowess, young Americans look pretty good in 4th grade, so-so in 8th grade but really bad by 12th grade. Something is amiss and it's worse in high school than in the early grades.

Our high schools' meager academic output is also attested to by college professors who find ever more of their entering students in need of "remedial" work before being ready to tackle college-level courses, even when these are gauged by the modest standards of many American postsecondary institutions. Employers of recent high school graduates similarly lament their weak academic skills, shoddy work habits and dubious character traits. Monitors of civic engagement and voting patterns remark both on how little our high school graduates know about their community and government and on how little many of them seem to care.

Linger for a moment with those latter criticisms and note that they pertain not only to academics but also to civic and personal attributes. The fact is that we want our high schools—our last truly universal "socializing" institution before young people enter adulthood—to prepare their pupils on many fronts, not just cognitive skills and knowledge. Indeed, this entire discussion would be easier and its conclusions simpler if faulty academics were the exclusive criticism of today's high schools. If that were the sole problem seeking a solution, we could readily visualize—even if we could not easily implement—a set of plausible reforms. But it's hard to stop there. America wants strong academics from its high schools, yes indeed, but we want more than that. We also want them to forge good adults.

Why is so little of this happening today? Many thoughtful individuals and solemn commissions have sought to diagnose what ails the American high school at the dawn of the 21st Century. We can detect the beginnings of a rough consensus about the problem. It includes seven elements:

First, *Mission Confusion*. Writing for the *National Commission on the High School Senior Year*, Michael C. Rubenstein put it well:

> Throughout their history, high schools have periodically reacted to three major visions [that]...have competed for the hearts and minds of Americans...with each taking turns rising and falling in the politics of education. Thus, high schools have been subjected to destabilizing reform cycles as one vision fell out of favor and was replaced by another. The first vision, championed most eloquently by John Dewey, views schools as social agents whose mission is to produce well-rounded, literate citizens able and ready to advance the cause of democracy and civilization.... The second vision, perhaps best captured in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, views schools first and foremost as academic institutions whose mission is to prepare students for advanced learning in college and beyond.... The third vision, espoused by the 1991 Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), views schools primarily as economic institutions, whose mission is to prepare students for employment in an expanded economy.... Proponents of these three visions have been unable to find common ground. Instead, each carved out a piece of the high school, splintering the institution and its mission.

> Second, *remediation.* As if three competing visions weren't vexing enough, today's high schools are also expected to shoulder another weighty burden: completing (or even re-doing) the basic education that our elementary schools cannot be counted upon to supply their students. If the three R's and a decent ration of fundamental knowledge don't get solidly implanted during a student's first nine years of formal schooling, it becomes the high schools' job—albeit one for which they're ill-prepared and unsuitably staffed—to fill in what's missing. For some youngsters, therefore, what should have been a solid secondary education becomes a belated primary education—which naturally means that some source other than high school will have to supply a proper secondary education, if such a thing ever gets supplied.

Third is *scale*. Most U.S. high schools are simply too big, making them impersonal, anonymous places where it's easy for timid students to disappear, for troublemakers to elude responsibility, and for adults to view their youthful charges as numbers rather than individuals. This scale is partly a consequence of public education's quest for efficiency but primarily a result of the push for comprehensiveness: the insistence that every high school contain within its own four walls a complete college-prep program (with multiple foreign languages, honors courses, science labs, etc.); vocational and technical options for students aiming for the workforce; the remains of the old "general" track for students who don't know where they're headed but crave that diploma; the full gamut of extra-curricular and athletic programs, from varsity football to orchestra to newspaper; and a slew of health and social service programs for students, families and community.

Fourth is *pupil motivation*. Every state has a compulsory attendance law that ostensibly requires young people to attend school until they are sixteen, seventeen or eighteen years old. Enforcement is spotty, however. Nobody goes to jail or gets fined for dropping out of school—or letting their kids skip classes. Hence high school attendance is often low while truancy and tardiness soar, along with dropout and fall-by-the-wayside rates. Yet perhaps the biggest motivation problem stems from the fact that, for many young people, high school is deeply boring—and how one does there doesn't much matter. So long as one puts in the time and accumulates the credits for that diploma, one's grades, class rank and extracurricular participation does not count for a lot in the real world, except for that small fraction of students aiming for highly selective colleges. For everyone else, the college down the road can be counted on to admit them pretty much regardless of their grades and test scores. While an employer may ask if they have a diploma, he's not apt to inspect one's transcript.

Though a number of states are ratcheting up the pressure by requiring students to pass exit exams before graduating, the world outside the schoolhouse still whispers that how one does in high school isn't terribly important. That message wreaks havoc at 9 p.m. on a Wednesday night when an adolescent must decide whether to buckle down to revise that history paper, turn on the TV, or go out with his pals. In their own

peculiar way, teen-agers are rational beings that constantly subject their options to an informal cost-benefit analysis. The high school can rarely persuade them that the benefit of studying harder is worth the effort—and deferred gratification—entailed in doing so. In *Horace's Compromise*, Theodore Sizer painted a devastating portrait of the U.S. high school as a place where students and teachers strike a Faustian bargain under which the young don't give too much grief to the old so long as the latter don't inflict too much work upon the former.

Fifth is *Obsolete Notions of Teaching and Learning.* One reason that high school is boring is that its instructional modes and technologies haven't changed in a century, though everything else in the world has changed. The typical instructional setting still consists of 20-25 students sitting at their desks for 50 minutes while a grown up talks at—and, if they're fortunate, with—them. Worse, those adults usually see themselves more as college faculty—i.e. the custodians and presenters of their particular subject—than as partners with young people in a complicated learning process. They assume that it's the students' responsibility to absorb, process and internalize the knowledge they have supplied. That mindset, which could allow—even justify—widespread student failure, is simply incompatible with the nation's policy goal of ensuring that all its young people reach high levels of achievement. And it's apt to strike students as unhelpful, off-putting, and boredom inducing. In other parts of their lives, they encounter far more riveting ways of learning things and people who are far more engaged in their lives (sometimes for ill). Is it really a surprise that they learn more outside of school than in? And that they can't wait for school to end each afternoon so they can get to the interesting parts of their education?

Sixth, *Changing Lives and Career Patterns.* Technology isn't all that's changed. So have the lives of young people. Our high schools were designed for a world that no longer exists for many American adolescents. When one cumulates the effects on them of popular culture (especially television and music); the internet, cell phone and e-mail; the sexual revolution, drugs and alcohol; teen-age employment; juvenile gangs; the automobile; and the deteriorating family, their world no longer resembles the Ozzie and Harriet society of James B. Conant in the 1950's. Though today's high school makes an effort to keep pace—installing computers in classrooms, perhaps operating a day care center for students' babies, adding drug-abuse prevention programs and sex education classes—its basic institutional arrangements are sadly out of whack with the world these young people actually inhabit.

So are its inherent assumptions about their subsequent careers. Few of today's young Americans are pointed toward single life-long jobs like those of their grandparents. Instead, they're headed onto curving paths that will include (multiple) stops in higher education and an array of jobs, very likely in different fields and with very different skill and knowledge requirements. That means it's time to retire the old high school sorting mechanism that directs some students into the college track and others onto a vocational pathway.

Seventh and finally is *the proliferation of rival providers.* High schools are losing their monopoly on secondary education. Even without explicitly embracing a policy of school choice, America has begun to provide teenagers and young adults with many ways of getting—and showing that they got—an education. They can study at home; enroll in "virtual" schools; sign up for courses at the local community college or technical institute; attend an "alternative" or continuation school, possibly one with an appealing work-study component; learn on-the-job via employer-provided programs, many of these delivered with great technological sophistication; and use the G.E.D., state exit tests or other means of demonstrating that they've learned what they needed to. High schools aren't used to competing in this kind of marketplace and few are well situated to do so.

Reform's Sorry High School Record

Many efforts have been and are being made to revitalize the high school as part of America's larger project of elementary-secondary education reform. In fact the "Excellence Commission's" main prescription in 1983 focused on the high school, urging that it beef up graduation requirements to demand exposure to the "new basics" (4 years of English, 3 years of math, etc.) for every student. Many efforts have since been undertaken by states and communities, as well as corporations, foundations, universities and education groups, to cure what ails U.S. high schools.

Yet little has come of it. Test scores—whether one is looking at NAEP results, TIMSS scores, SAT averages, etc.—remain essentially flat at an unacceptably low level. Graduation rates also remain flat at too low a level. That the country is doing as well as it is, is due not to the terrific contribution of today's high schools but, rather, to a remarkable set of "coping" mechanisms that enable us to field a sufficiency of competent adults despite our high schools. Ours is an endlessly forgiving society in which one can always come back for more education or another credential, and lots of people do. Employer-run training programs, community colleges and GED programs all flourish. Churches, the Marine Corps and a reasonably robust civil society work on character and citizenship. Adults return to technical schools or learn from the Internet. And when we can't grow enough of our own skilled workers, we import them from abroad.

So we cope and, as a nation, we've fared pretty well. But we can't thank our high schools for much of that, nor can we claim that the reform movements that seem finally to be gaining traction in the earlier grades are also having the intended effect on high schools. Indeed, it's generally conceded by school watchers that the two dominant strands of reform in U.S. education—the standards-based version and the competition-based kind—have had much greater impact on our elementary schools than our secondary institutions.

Standards-based reform is making headway in the K-8 schools as states set standards, create tests that are (ostensibly) calibrated to those standards, and deploy

an array of incentives and sanctions for students and educators that are meant to push them to strive harder to attain those standards. Even more of this will happen as new federal rules grab hold, requiring every state to set standards, test all its students (in grades 3-8, as well as once during high school) and intervene in cases of failing schools. Conscientious states and communities go further, aligning their curricula, textbook selections, teacher training and other elements of the "delivery system" with their standards and tests and trying to ensure that every youngster has a decent chance to learn that for which they'll be held accountable. Yet aside from the imposition of statewide graduation tests (often pegged to a 10th grade achievement level or even lower), this whole edifice of standards-based reform has scarcely touched America's high schools. Where it has, as in Texas, the new results-based approach is typically layered atop a set of "excellence commission" style efforts keyed to course requirements and Carnegie units. The result, not surprisingly, is confusion as to whether the standards that matter are those associated with the courses or those built into the exit tests. This confusion is deepened by the move in some states to institute uniform "end of course" exams.

Competition-style reform is also less robust at the secondary level. Voucher users (both the publicly funded and privately funded kinds) are mainly to be found in K-8 schools. Few of America's 2400 charter schools are high schools. And even in the domain of "public school choice", secondary students have fewer options, if only because their schools are less numerous, larger, geographically more distant and—thanks to the assumption of comprehensiveness—more apt to resemble one another.

Federal Policy Perplex

High schools are a stepchild of federal policy, too, marooned between Washington's focus on the early/middle grades and the major attention that Uncle Sam pays to college. The newly enacted "no child left behind" amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) are emblematic of this indeterminate status. Despite the "S" in the law's name, most of the attention and money is concentrated on the "E". That's where the new annual testing (and National Assessment) requirements hit hardest; where the main emphasis on academic standards is placed; where "adequate yearly progress" will be monitored most closely; where the new reading program will happen; and where we find most of the programs and rules designed to produce better teachers, better uses of technology, better curricula, and so forth.

Stepping back, we can encapsulate in a few words what Congress and the President expect the K-8 system to do: produce measurably higher academic achievement in reading and math (and, in time, science) across the board, close the performance gap between rich and poor children, and turn around failing schools.

We can also say with fair clarity what federal policy makers expect of our higher education system—and are putting many billions into subsidizing: wider economic access to college combined with world-class scientific research.

But what does Washington want from the country's high schools? Nobody can quite say. Only in the realm of vocational/technical education are there sizable programs with reasonably clear objectives at the secondary level, and most of those have their roots in the very different society of the early 20th century. Most, moreover, relate to non-college-bound students—a shrinking population—and to specialized "tracks" or schools designed to help ready them for direct access to lifetime trades of the sort that grow ever scarcer.

To be sure, that's not the whole story. Washington stories are seldom simple. Besides the long-established voc-ed programs of the Perkins Act and its kin, we find a hodgepodge of smallish initiatives. We find a "Presidential Scholars" program meant to recognize high school students who do well in completing a reasonably demanding core curriculum. And we find incidental policies that affect high schooling but may even work at cross-purposes with one another. For example, the armed forces now expect their recruits to have high school diplomas; but the Department of Transportation recently ruled that the newly federalized airport baggage inspectors need not possess such credentials.

Taken as a whole, it simply doesn't add up. As Churchill once said of a bland dessert, "This pudding has no theme." We don't exaggerate much in saying that there is no real federal policy for high schools.

Is that a good or bad thing? Given Washington's propensity to complicate, even mess up, that which it touches in education, it's not irrational to prefer benign neglect. In this case, however, the federal policy vacuum mirrors the nationwide confusion that besets high schooling and the absence of clear direction and expectations that we've also noticed at state and local levels. Uncle Sam would be wise to stay out of something that's working well. But when it comes to high schools, the federal policy muddle reflects the country's uncertainty about what they should be accomplishing.

Sad Confusion or Needed Experimentation?

What to do? As we look ahead, let's acknowledge that some worthy efforts are underway to rejuvenate the American high school, even if they're less obtrusive than the fractious public policy battles over tests and vouchers. The federal Education Department and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, are experimenting with making high schools smaller and with encouraging new school designs (although the Gates dollars seem to favor "progressive" models to those that stress content and standards). Some of the whole-school models that have achieved attention in recent years focus on the high school years, among them the Southern Regional Education Board's High Schools That Work program and Theodore Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools. The recent report of the *National Commission on the High School Senior Year*

offers numerous suggestions for revitalizing the twelfth grade, which many believe to be time largely wasted. A couple of states—most famously Oregon—are devising a "certificate of mastery" approach to high schooling, meant to create a common academic threshold that is to be attained —and then branched off from—by all young people. Others are striving to smooth the high school to college transition by viewing education as a "K-16" continuum.

The experimentation is surely worthy—and I suggest more of it below. To date, however, there's no shape or direction to it. It seems like a helter-skelter array of "try something different" schemes with no common theme beyond discontent with the status quo and the sense that surely there must be a better way to do things. Just as mission confusion characterizes the high school itself, so does reform confusion typify our efforts to solve the problem.

This, too, could turn out okay. As has oft been noted, private philanthropy can do things that government is not able to undertake, and states—our "laboratories of democracy"—often serve us well by doing things differently from one another. If America has no clear national consensus about what its high schools should be, how they should work and what they should produce, perhaps we ought to welcome experimentation with various reform strategies. This approach will prove more beneficial, though, if we're vigilant in monitoring and rigorous in evaluating the various innovations so that serious lessons can be gleaned from this round of experimentation.

Besides experimenting, can we point to any clear destination for U.S. high schools in the early 21st Century? I can begin to glimpse a path—two paths, really--through the present thicket. If we walk a little way down each of them, we might also find the beginnings of guidance for future federal policy.

On the Threshold of Adulthood

The soundest way to think of high schooling is preparation for adulthood. Every society, every culture, indeed every tribe, has some arrangement or rite of passage whereby its young get inducted into adult society, a means by which they learn what they need to know and acquire the habits and values they are expected to display as grown-up participants in their society.

What does America want from its young adults? I believe we have three main hopes for them.

First, that they possess the skills and knowledge that will make them independent, self-sufficient and productive members of our society, no matter what educational and vocational paths they later follow. Call it economic readiness.

Second, that they be ready to take their places as citizens, with decent knowledge of their government and community, some grounding in the history,

governance, geography and culture of their nation, and a desire (and the requisite know-how) to participate constructively in adult society. Call it civic readiness.

Third, that they be good people, self-disciplined and ethical, honest and law-abiding, cooperative, confident, caring and optimistic. Call it personal readiness.

When we set this trio of desiderata alongside the traditional U.S. high school, we quickly note that only the first of them—economic readiness—fits reasonably well. We are most accustomed to viewing schools as places where the young gain skills and knowledge. This is their minimal role, the mission that most of the recent reform fuss has been about, and the realm where they are least apt to share the burden with other institutions. School is where most people learn algebra and U.S. history, chemistry and poetry. Doing a better job of those things is what we're clearest about when it comes to education reform. All the fuss about standards, tests and accountability derives from our insistence that schools do a better job of it—and that students be expected actually to learn it, not just pass their time going through the motions.

The second attribute—civic readiness—is something most people would like to see American schools guarantee even as we acknowledge that they have difficulty in accomplishing this. Insofar it depends on a knowledge base—knowing, for example, that each state has two Senators—we can reasonably look to schools to construct it (and we have tests to measure it). But much of civic readiness consists of attitudes, habits and dispositions. There's little decent data on this matter—there seldom is on such "soft" topics—but a lot of cultural signals, anecdotes, employer comments and suchlike indicate that we're not doing a satisfactory job of producing young adults with the right mix of qualities. Many teachers earnestly try to impart such attributes to their students but it's my impression that most of today's high schools are simply not very effective in this domain—possibly because we have traditionally expected other civic institutions to shoulder much of this burden.

As for personal readiness—the third attribute—we've relied primarily on church, family, community, the military, and other elements of civil society (e.g. the Boy Scouts, the Girls' Club) to do the heavy lifting. Schools may try to assist via guidance counselors, coaches and other adults, as well as the valiant efforts of conscientious classroom teachers, but American society hasn't really expected them to bear much of the responsibility. Nor do we have reliable assessments by which to know how well it's working, though lots of anecdotal and quasi-statistical evidence (e.g. high rates of cheating and plagiarism among college students) suggest that we ought be far from satisfied.

In pondering the high school's future mission, therefore, let's acknowledge a paradox. High school is our principal instrumentality for assuring the orderly passage of children into adulthood, our chief public institution for trying to ensure that all our young people are well prepared for that passage. Of all our acculturating institutions (aside from family and mass media), it is the only one that aspires to universality. Yet a lot of our young people don't even stick with it to completion. And of the three forms of

"readiness" that we seek in our young adults, today's high schools—when they're working well—are good at perhaps one and a half of these.

Two Big Options

We should, therefore, take one of two paths into the future. Either we should scale back our expectations of high school to accord with what today's institutions can handle—and what can be assessed among those who don't go through conventional high schools—or we should re-engineer these institutions so that they're proficient on all three fronts. If we take the former path, we greatly simplify the task of reforming high schools. We focus on skills and knowledge and economic readiness and we strive to create schools that are effective in that dimension, while also building tests whereby young people who can acquire the requisite skills and knowledge elsewhere need not waste time in school. If we focus our efforts so narrowly, however, we risk not ending up with the sorts of adults that we really want.

If, instead, we expect high schools to succeed on all three fronts—to vouchsafe their graduates' civic and personal readiness as well as their economic preparedness—we may need different kinds of institutions. Earnest teachers may not suffice. Though we surely need to learn more about the attributes of existing high schools that seem relatively strong in these other dimensions (e.g. Jesuit schools), and determine the extent to which their formula is transferable, we may also wish to design high schools that function more explicitly "in loco parentis." Today, that's most often found in specialized 24/7 settings, ranging from elite boarding schools to juvenile prisons, from old-fashioned orphanages to a handful of residential charter schools. But they're very different from conventional six-hours-a-day high schools. And their cost is greater.

Is American society ready to give its regular high schools much stronger leverage over the formation of adolescents? Pay the dollar price? And risk the marginalizing of other institutions—from church to family to YMCA—that could result from an enlarged high school mission? No, American society is probably not ready to do so. It is, however, a suitable area for experimentation, and this may suggest a fruitful field for federal (and philanthropic) activity. We'll return to this below. First, though, the simpler policy option deserves attention.

Beefing Up the Academics

Sticking for now to the high school's academic mission and its strengthening, the clear trend of state policy is to set exit requirements that students must meet before receiving diplomas, and to enforce these via high-stakes tests. The point is to insist on a certain level of skill and knowledge attainment before conferring the credential that signifies high school completion.

As we have seen, this effort is fraught with difficulty. Lots of young people arrive in high school without a decent elementary foundation. Once there, few are motivated to study hard and do well. Too many give up or get bored and drop out.

Behind standards-based reform are two hopes, which, if realized, would go a considerable distance toward solving these problems.

First, it is hoped that having to meet standards in the earlier grades—and being tested and held accountable for them—will cause elementary schools and their pupils to do a far better job with basic skills and knowledge. That would help ready young people for a true secondary education in high school (and ease the dropout problem by ensuring that more young people feel successful in school and less inclined to flee from it.)

Second, it is hoped that statewide high school exit test requirements will motivate diploma-hungry students to take their studies more seriously, at least seriously enough to prepare to pass those pesky tests.

There is early evidence from some states that these hopes are not fantasies, that after much grousing about "teaching to the test," "narrowing the curriculum" and "turning floors into ceilings", actual gains do result from this regimen, rich-poor achievement gaps do narrow and minority youngsters do better. Still, it's premature to be certain how far-reaching these effects will be and whether they will be accompanied by such unwanted side effects as more dropouts at the low end and fewer Advanced Placement courses at the high end.

How might federal policies further the cause of standards-based, academics-centered renewal at the high school level? Five possibilities hold promise:

First, academic requirements for federal student aid (and federal employment). In dealing with real-world incentives, there is a huge opportunity for the federal government but it's a bullet that Congress and the executive branch have heretofore been afraid to bite, which is to add some academic attainment prerequisites to federal student aid. If we're unwilling to prescribe these nationally, what about saying that nobody gets aided unless they've met the full requirements for high school graduation set by their state of residence? The upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act is the obvious time to tackle this. But we need not wait for that to try to turn Uncle Sam into a model employer who insists not only on high school diplomas from all his workers but also makes it matter whether someone did well or poorly in school. Higher civil service grades, military ranks or pay levels for those with a strong academic record would be the obvious way to start.

Second, Better 12th Grade NAEP. It's commonly acknowledged that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a far better barometer of student achievement in grades 4 and 8 than in grade 12. There is discouraging evidence that high school seniors don't take it seriously because, once again, it doesn't "count" in

their lives. So mistrusted are those scores, in fact, that the move to report NAEP results at the state level (and, in a few places, the local level) has never included 12th grade results in any subject. This needs to change. And Washington needs to find ways of motivating 12th graders to take these tests seriously. (The solution may be as simple as paying them for at least completing the tests.) If we don't have good data about student achievement at the end of high school, we'll never know whether efforts to improve the high school are making any headway. States need those data even more than Uncle Sam does.

Third, research and pilot programs geared to making high school more engaging for young people. This includes some of the experimentation with new school designs noted above—and careful evaluation of efforts undertaken by others. It could also include imaginative investigations of the use of technology and distance learning, different ways of training high school teachers, etc.

Fourth, extend the logic of "no student left behind" to place greater attention on the high school years. As noted earlier, the recent renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act stressed the "elementary" part. The main secondary testing provision level simply stipulates that students be tested "at least once" during their high school years. Though states must develop and publicize their academic standards at the secondary level and must disclose how well individual schools are doing at making "adequate yearly progress" toward those standards—sunshine and public information that will help call attention to problem schools—the single round of testing means that a lot of the oomph is gone. It means, for example, that there's no way to measure the academic "value" added to a student or cohort of students from one year to the next. Because the range of important high school courses goes far beyond reading and math, the federal testing requirement may even distort the curriculum while neglecting some key subjects. And the many high schools that receive no federal Title I dollars will be spared from the specific sanctions mandated for low-performing Title I schools. All of this suggests that the next E.S.E.A. cycle should focus on secondary schools, pushing states to set good standards for high school attainment—across a full core curriculum—and accompany these with suitable assessments, rewards and interventions.

Fifth, promote school choice, not just for the familiar reasons set forth on behalf of charter schools, vouchers and the like, but also as a promising form of dropout prevention and recovery. Adolescents are ornery, authority-averse people who don't like being told what to do. They like to make their own decisions. Let those decisions include which schools to attend. There's evidence that people perform better in schools they've chosen for themselves. Once someone has dropped out, moreover, the best bet for getting them back into education is through some alternative arrangement, not returning them to the same schools where they failed. Though states bear the main burden of school-choice policy, Uncle Sam could assist through aid to charter schools, programs that encourage alternative schools, and a host of ways by which community (and other) colleges, job-training programs and adult education programs could be made accessible to teen-agers. The Secretary of Education might also convene a

summit conference on the pros and cons of compulsory attendance, whether—and how—to do it, and what some alternatives might be.

Re-engineering the High School

Returning to the "macro" conception of high schools, i.e. as institutions that attend to personal and civic as well as academic and economic readiness, it's important for Washington to tread lightly. These are domains where Americans are wary of governmental (especially federal) involvement and where damage can be done to civil society if it appears that government is taking over. But that does not mean Uncle Sam must be inert. Here, too, he might explore five policy directions.

First, explore more experimentation, research and evaluation, not just with government-sponsored programs but also the privately conceived sort. Just how good are those Jesuit high schools, for example, at inculcating civic and personal as well as economic readiness in their students? For that matter, are we sure that this is handled well at Andover? Are there "conventional" high schools that do a relatively good job of it and, if so, why? To what extent can their formula be successfully imparted to others? As for efforts to imagine and design new institutional forms, we should expect that they'll work differently from one another, that some will work better for some purposes than others, and that no one model will fit every young person's—or community's—situation. Institutional reinvention is hard. There will be false starts. It's not impossible, though. The community college is an extraordinary institutional innovation of American education. So is its cousin, the technical institute. Perhaps it's time to become as inventive with respect to the high school.

Second, this kind of innovativeness—preparing young people for life, including but not limited to economic readiness—might become the focus of the next generation of the Perkins Act and other traditional venues for federal vocational education policy. I think much leeway ought be given to states and communities to use these dollars flexibly, and I'm not knowledgeable enough to suggest many specifics. But this feels like the right direction, especially when coupled with results-based accountability akin to the "charter states" idea that President Bush proposed for E.S.E.A. If it no longer makes sense to isolate some students in a vocational/technical track while others are prepared for further education, it cannot make sense to isolate federal dollars for that purpose.

Third, Washington should engage in orderly, creative thinking about its own civic and character-shaping programs outside of formal education. These range from the military to the Peace Corps to the Corporation for National Service. They have traditionally focused on people who have already completed high school. Perhaps they should create opportunities—on and off campus—for those who have not yet graduated. "Junior ROTC" is one model for this.

Fourth, explore more choice policies. Given the strong views of families and communities on these matters, Washington is wiser to help create options than to impose mandates. It may be, for example, that extra funding should be provided to charter schools that operate 24/7 or schools that operate year-round. Perhaps civic institutions should get extra incentives to open school-like or "virtual school" programs that afford additional choices to young people. But the theory of choice does not stop with individuals. States and communities should also have wide discretion over how they spend their federal education dollars, particularly with regard to high schools.

Fifth, examine the bully pulpit. Re-engineering the high school needs changed attitudes and expectations at least as much as it calls for new structural arrangements. National leaders can do a great deal here: calling attention to problems, giving air time to ideas, saying things that get journalists to write about them, rewarding innovators, fostering debate about options, creating "summits" to focus the minds of others on these issues. Today, one seldom hears top federal officials—in Congress or the executive branch—addressing high school issues (except for discipline and violence) in sustained and interesting ways. That should change.

Conclusion

It would be wrong to end this discussion by implying that what ails the high school is a disease waiting for a federal cure. As with everything in American education, most key decisions will continue to be made by states and localities, in individual schools and classrooms, and around millions of kitchen tables. Most of the money will continue to come from non-Washington sources, as will most of the energy for reform. We would make matters worse if we even hinted that these wellsprings of resources and resourcefulness could flow elsewhere while Uncle Sam takes responsibility for this problem and its solution.

Yet this brief overview has argued that policy incoherence in the nation's capital with respect to high schools is representative of a broader national confusion about them. The latter is the real problem. Washington could contribute in various ways to its solution. The place to start is by acknowledging that our high schools urgently await this kind of attention.

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